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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted in 1988 by a community college librarian who was seeking an objective guide for weeding unused library books. It was hypothesized that a book not used in a certain number of years would never be used. At the beginning of the study, no books had ever been weeded although the library had begun acquiring books in 1969. To test the hypothesis, books were used that had the longest use (or nonuse) records, i.e., those acquired in 1977 and 1978, during which time permanent use records were first kept. Results of the study are displayed in a graph that illustrates the likelihood of previously unused books being used in the next single year: "first use" of the books was heavy in the first two years; there was a somewhat lower level of use for the next three years; and then a final period of at least five years showed that around 10% of the previously unused books were used for the first time each year. It was concluded that more time and another study would be needed to show if there is some future period during which "first use" truly drops to zero or near it. According to this study, nonuse cannot be relied on for weeding books for at least eight years after acquisition. (CGD)

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WHEN CAN YOU WEED AN UNUSED BOOK?

A study done in 1988

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When Can You Weed an Unused Book?

There are two contradictory pieces of conventional wisdom regarding weeding of unused books.

> "The unused book you weed today will be just the one a patron will need tomorrow."
>
> "If a book is not used in three (four, five) years, it will never be used."

I personally leaned toward the second statement, probably because I wanted it to be true. After all, sooner or later I have to weed and if I can't utilize lack of use as a guide, I am left with no objective guide at all.

But I also have a penchant for truth as well as a professional responsibility not to exercise my prejudices. If nonuse is not a reliable guide, I need to know that before I weed. I decided to find out and was, fortunately, in an ideal situation to do so.

Columbia-Greene CC Library began acquiring books in 1969 but it was not until Jan.1, 1977 that we began keeping a permanent use record in each book. Each book also bears an acquisition year stamp. Thus for any book I can quickly tell the year it was acquired and its use since 1977.

The collection stood at just about 20,000 in 1977 and is now just about double that. It has never been weeded, something important to the integrity of the study. All the books we've acquired are still with us, used or not. Also our circulation has bounced in a narrow range of from 20,000 to 25,000 over the years, again important to the study.

I wanted the books with the longest use (or nonuse) records possible and in sufficient numbers to mean something. That meant the 1977 or 1978 acquisitions. There are lots of them and they are the oldest books for which we have complete use records. In fact, for each book we have the year of acquisition plus at least nine more years, surely enough time to "prove" the hypothesis. I even had the raw data on enough of these books. We'd gathered it as part of a 10% arithmetic sample of the entire collection taken for other purposes but useful for this as well. All I needed to do was compile the data into useable form.

To test the hypothesis I needed only look at "first use". If a book was ever used, according to the hypothesis, it was not a candidate for weeding, only previously unused books are. But of the previously unused books at any given time, how many will later be used? That is the question. I <u>expected</u> to find the percent of "first use" of previously unused books gradually dwindling to zero or very near it.

The sample size is large. In all, I had the individual experiences of 833 books acquired in either 1977 or 1978. That amounts to about 1% of the entire collection and 14% of the 1977 or 1978 acquisitions.

The accompanying graph shows the results of the study. Taken from left to right, I can see that 386 or 46% of the books received their first use in the year of acquisition. Of those left unused (447), 170 or 38% were used in the next year, leaving 277 still unused. Then 56 or 20% of the 277 were used, and so on. In short, the graph simply illustrates the likelihood of previously unused books being used in the next single year.

The graph easily demolishes the original hypothesis, or at least it does for books unused for nine years or less. There is an unsurprising heavy "first use" in the first two years, then a somewhat lower level for the next three years, and then a final period of at least five years (it may be longer but I ran out of years) during which "first use" of previously unused books hovers around 10% a year. Put another way, if I had thrown out the unused books at 8 years plus the acquisition year, I'd have been wrong on one in ten by the very next year.

Worse, suppose I had weeded after five years plus the acquisition year? At that point I'd have discarded 115 unused books. I didn't, and 38 or 33% of those books were subsequently used in the next four years. How many will ever be used is anyone's guess.

I cannot extrapolate this graph to infinity. Only more time and another study will show if there is some future period after which "first use" truly drops to zero or near it. But it is plain that at least for eight years after acquisition, you cannot simply rely on nonuse and weed with a light heart.

There is, of course, another way of looking at this. Remember that the use rate of new books is much higher. Fully 556 or 67% of my sample was used in either their acquisition year or the year after. Contrast this with the level for long unused books and the perspective clears a bit. If I have the option, I will not weed. But if I must choose between room for new books or weeding, then I'll weed and it will be unused books I weed. The same goes for removing student seating instead of weeding. Certainly I'll do damage if I weed unused books. The study clearly shows I will and even how much. But the alternative is much more damaging and now I know the cost benefit.

Some final comments. I might be tempted to believe that I could somehow "select" those of the unused books likely to be used in the future and discard the rest, thus avoiding any damage at all. I am, I'd like to believe, a bright professional with much experience. Surely I would not blindly weed, and surely my expertise would ward off error. It sounds good. But the simple fact is that if I were all that smart, I wouldn't have bought those books in the first place (and I did select them personally). I can console myself that 91% of the books were eventually used (so far), but that just means I was wrong 9% of the time. I can't see why I'll do any better when I'm weeding instead of selecting.

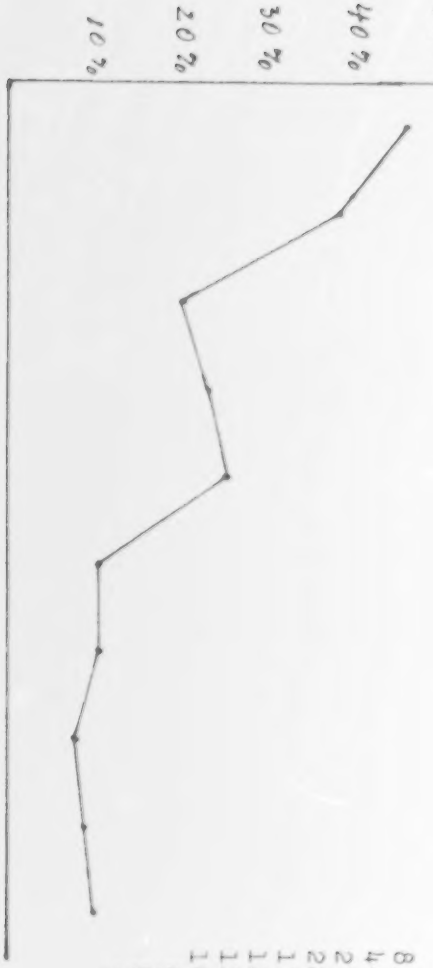
I find this study method far superior to another I've read about. The present study looks at the record of books not even previously considered for weeding. They were on the shelf, in the catalog, treated identically to all other books. The study asks what would have happened, after the fact.

The alternative method I've read involves removing the books but leaving the records in the catalog and then tallying how many get asked for. This seems to me to "stack the deck" against these books. I don't think it fairly measures the likelihood of future use. Instead, I believe it measures how good patrons are at using the catalog, how likely they are to ask for books not on the shelf, and it leaves out

the very important effects of patrons finding books by browsing. At least the patrons of this library (and myself) are wont to jot down a few call numbers to get "into the ballpark" and then browse the shelves in those locations. I suggest that any who would use that method of study also see how a control group of previously used books not being considered for weeding fare under similar treatment.

Number of previously unused that were used.		
386	Acq. yr.	46%
170	Acq. +1	38%
56	Acq. +2	20%
50	Acq. +3	23%
42	Acq. +4	25%
14	Acq. +5	11%
13	Acq. +6	11%
8	Acq. +7	8%
8	Acq. +8	9%
9	Acq. +9	10%
756 or 91%		

PERCENT OF PREVIOUSLY UNUSED 1977 or 1978 ACQUISITIONS THAT WERE USED IN THE FOLLOWING YEAR.



Number left unused, year end.	
833	start
447	Acq. yr.
277	Acq. +1
221	Acq. +2
171	Acq. +3
129	Acq. +4
115	Acq. +5
102	Acq. +6
94	Acq. +7
86	Acq. +8
77	Acq. +9